

## **StoryBuilding Structures**

These written structures, three based on popular children's books and one free form (without a children's book as a base), will provide guidance as you begin using the drama process approach. Use them as a way of learning how to structure sessions, until you can do it yourself.

***Sylvester and the Magic Pebble***

**by William Steig**

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***The Adventures of Taxi Dog***

**by Debra and Sal Barracca**

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***Amazing Grace***

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(free form)**

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**STORYBUILDING WITH...**  
***Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, by William Steig***  
StoryBuilding structure by Rändi Douglas

**1. INTRODUCTION – A STORY ABOUT ANIMALS:** Whole group discussion

Circle the room showing the front and the back of the book.

Ask: What is the story about?

Ask: Would you be willing to jump into the story?

**2. EXPLORING FAMILIES OF ANIMALS:** Small groups – frozen picture

Ask students to identify some different animals this story could be about. Ask groups of 4 –5 if they could 1) select an animal to portray; 2) create a frozen moment showing how this family interacts. Give groups just a short time to work (3 – 4 minutes) then review the group work.

**3. THE MAGIC OBJECT:** Whole group – circle of experts

Read to page 4 (Sylvester finds the magic stone)

This book is about a magic object. Let's all stand in a circle together. Ask students if they will become the great magicians who create the magic objects. As their servant, welcome them into the room. Ask: 1) What magic objects shall you plant on earth for the people or animals to find? 2) What magic will it do? Go around the room, allowing each person to describe their magic object.

Ask the magicians to think where they might place their magic object on earth. Where should it be? They can discuss this with some magician next to them. Allow one-two minutes, then collect some answers.

**4. WHAT WE WOULD WISH:** Half groups of Individuals – speaking their magic

Read to page 5 (Sylvester wishes)

When the magic objects are placed, divide the room in half. Ask half of the students (others observe) if they willing to change roles and become an animal on a walk. They should find a place in the room where they can stand alone. Then ask each to imagine they are at the very spot where they sense a magic object. On the count of three, ask them to reach for the magic object, and then freeze. Wait until the entire group is frozen, then ask: Now that you have found a magic object, will you wish for? Go around the room, collecting answers. Repeat with the other half of the room.

## **5. SHARING THE POWER OF MAGIC:** Partners in dialogue

Then ask: Now that you have found a magic object this special, what will you do? What thought is in your mind? Ask students to find a partner that will become their trusted friend, and talk it over with them. Then ask them to return to their spots, and frozen picture. In light of the conversation they've just had, what will be the first destination? They recognize the magic they hold and they turn to go to....(let each person fill in the blank out loud).

## **6. THE DANGER AHEAD:** Small groups of 4 or 5 – frozen moments or tableaux Read the two lion pages just until the “mistake” is discovered.

Discuss with students the story so far. A journey, a magic object is found, a danger occurs and a “mistake” wish is made. Could we make up our own versions?

There is a danger ahead, what could it be? Ask students to discuss the kinds of other dangers might be waiting for someone walking home alone. Ask to name some categories – weather, etc. Then ask groups to collaborate and show a frozen picture of danger ahead.

## **7. THE LOST CHILD:** Small groups of 4 or 5 – creating short scenes Read the story of the parents missing Sylvester.

Ask them to talk about what that would feel like. Can they work in small groups to play the parts of the sad family? Perhaps they are at the dinner table, what do they talk about when they're missing Sylvester? Ask students to decide who they are in the picture, what they might be doing, and one thing each person might say. Share scenes and reflect about them.

## **8. THE PASSAGE OF TIME:** Half group forum, one active/one observing – creating thoughts Read the story about how much time passes with Sylvester still a rock.

Ask: What happens to people when they're separated and alone for a very long time? Divide the room in half. Ask half the students to find their own place – far away from everyone else. They are Sylvester: ask them to imagine that they're a stone for one month, What kind of thoughts might they be having? Ask each “stone” to think of a thought, and when they feel a hand brush their shoulder, to say it out loud. Ask the observers to describe the emotions in what they have heard.

Now switch groups, asking the other half to become Sylvester as a stone. They are captured like this for one, two, then many more – up to eight months! How would things change for them over a longer time? Ask them each to think of one thought they might have at the very end of that time and speak it when they are tagged. Then ask the observers to describe how the feelings have changed.

**9. THE FAMILY REUNITED:** Groups of three – frozen pictures or tableaux

Read the story through the moment of Sylvester's wish.

At the moment Sylvester becomes himself again, before anyone has time to move – that would be a very interesting scene, wouldn't it? How would everyone look? What would they be thinking? Ask everyone to work in groups to show that moment in a frozen moment. Share each picture with the whole group, asking for captions or titles.

Finish reading the story to the end.

**10. RECAP THE STORY:** Whole group reflection, drawing and writing

Read the last two pages.

Congratulate the children on their excellent work. Ask them to retell the story from the beginning to the end, recapturing the events of the story in order. Discuss why the ending is "happy." You can also ask students to write or draw their own version of this story, based on work in this session. The story would include a family of animals, a magic object, wishes, an unexpected danger, a mistake, a separation and a happy ending. Students can work in teams to make their own book.

# STORYBUILDING WITH...

## *The Adventures of Taxi Dog*, by Debra and Sal Barracca

Storybuilding structure by Rändi Douglas

Explain to the group that you will be building a story together, using a process that allows everyone to take part and use their imagination to construct what happens – the events. Then ask:

- Do you like to work with your imagination? Is it something you enjoy?
- Are you willing to work together to create our own story, based on a book we will read very soon, called *The Adventures of Taxi Dog*?

If you receive some negative answers (not a common occurrence), try to work through objections, until you get a green light. A common way to deal with “I don’t want to’s,” is to say “Fine, you can sit in this chair and watch, but whenever you feel like joining in, please do.”

Usually, reluctant children will join in as soon as it looks like fun, which doesn’t take long. Then, proceed with the story.

### 1. **WELCOME** – Whole group meeting, seated in circle

Welcome everyone as experts to a very special Tenth Anniversary Reunion, a celebration of the tenth year since Maxi the dog contributed his story by writing the book called “The Adventures of Taxi Dog.” You have all been invited to join in because you were part of the original MAXI project. Since that time, you’ve moved on to work with other animals living in the city. Ask participants to share with a neighbor, what animal is the current focus of their work? After they talk for just a minute, collect animals named, so the entire group can hear.

### 2. **THE ANIMAL EXPERTS CONVENE** - Whole group milling – introductions

We understand, since you left the project on homeless dogs, you have all developed special communication skills and projects with these other animals. And you’ve won many special awards. I know you’ll want to tell your colleagues what you’ve been up to with the many animals who live in the city.

Ask participant to stand up and move freely to re-introduce themselves and let everyone know about their new and special projects on city animals. Allow about three – four minutes for chatter, then ask everyone to return to their seats. Ask the group to report on what they heard. What new projects are underway? What special skills have been developed. (Greatly appreciate each unique and interesting contribution, building confidence of the group).

### 3. **STORY READING** – Whole group listening

Remind the group that the celebration is upcoming, and that, to celebrate properly, we should all remind ourselves of this extraordinary book, based on Maxi’s life. Read the book, *The Adventures of Taxi Dog*, showing the pictures as you read. Ask if participants will describe their favorite parts of the story or what they like best about Maxi.

**4. HARD LIFE ON THE STREETS:** Small groups of 4-5 members – frozen pictures

Remind the group that, of course, Maxi didn't always have it so good. We all remember what it was like at the beginning of the project before this story, when our research began. We all went around the city, snapping photographs of homeless dogs in the city. These photos have, unfortunately, not been preserved, but they did show the many challenges of the life of a homeless dog.

Ask the group if they will be willing to re-create those pictures. Could they work together in groups of 4-5, using their bodies to show what the life of a homeless dog looked like, when the greatest challenges occurred. Allow 3-5 minutes for group work, checking often to see when work is complete.

Gather the pictures by sharing each picture with the whole group. Explain that, to take their places in a picture, you will slowly count - one-two-three-freeze – and that the count can be used to show a little action the moment before. As groups observe the pictures, ask them what title, or caption, they would offer.

**5. VOICES OF THE HOMELESS** - Half group forum – communication research

Ask if about half the participants would be willing to take the part of homeless dogs, gathers back at the research kennel. Gather them in the center of the room. Explain to the others, that they are the researchers, and have been observing these dogs for so long, they are beginning to understand their language. Each dog has developed a very distinctive sounds/motions, not always a bark, that communicates their feelings and needs and that most of you have come to understand.

Ask “dogs” to assume an “at rest” position in the kennel – how they might look when they are very tired. Then say that when you stand behind each “dog”, they should show the unique sounds/motions that they make. Ask researchers to describe the meanings they understand from each dog. When all dogs have been heard, ask researchers summarize their conclusions about the needs of homeless dogs, based on these communications. You can write these on a board or poster.

**6. MAXI'S UNTOLD ADVENTURES:** New small groups of 4 or 5 – creating short scenes

Explain that these conclusions, based on research and observations, lead to the project that found Maxi a home. Ask researchers to describe their role in the project with a partner (about 3 minutes). Then gather some of the roles described for the larger group.

Now explain that, after the project, we all followed Maxi for some time, in rotating shifts. We all observed many of his adventures – great ones that aren't even in the book and only a few people know. Ask researchers to gather in groups 4 – 5 and share their favorite and unique Maxi adventure that didn't appear in the book (4-5 minutes).

Then announce that, at the Maxi celebration, there will be a publisher interested in doing a “further adventures book.” Ask each group to select the best one they’ve heard and present it to the group in a very short scene (every person has one line). Ask each group to share their new Maxi adventures with the whole group. When completed, ask group to reflect on the new aspects of Maxi that will show in this second edition.

**7. TAXI MAXI GIVES BACK:** New groups of 3 or 4 – creating verse

Explain to the group that, when Maxi’s book became such a success, he indeed became a dog with special resources. He had so much prosperity, that he immediately became very active in the dog community, working to give back to those less fortunate. We would like to celebrate these projects in the ceremony tomorrow, with a short verse (like the ones in the book). Read a couple of pages of the book, so they can remember what the verses sound like; then write the rhyme scheme up where everyone can see it. Ask groups to each collaborate on a verse that tells about one of Maxi’s community projects. Share the verses, asking each group to read theirs in unison. Then ask the listeners to give a name to each project.

**8. REFLECTION:** Whole group reflection and discussion

Ask participants to remember the story -- from the research to Maxi’s adoption, adventures, and his own community projects. Ask each participant to write down a sentence that would describe the core meaning of the story for them. It could begin “For me, the whole Maxi story is about...” Then go around the room, collecting each participant’s statement.

# STORYBUILDING WITH...

## *Amazing Grace*, by Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch

Storybuilding structure by Rändi Douglas

### 1. INTRODUCTION – A STORY ABOUT BECOMING: Whole group discussion/listening

Ask: How many in this room are asked “And what do you want to be when you grow up?” And how many here know the answer? So how do we find out what we want to be when we grow up? Perhaps we can learn something important from this story, called *Amazing Grace*.

Read the story. Then ask who has had some similar experiences to Grace (ask for a show of hands). So could we use our imaginations and create our very own version?

### 2. WISHING TOGETHER: Whole group chant

Explain that it might be interesting to begin the story with some wishing practice, since wishing is a very big part of what goes on. Snapping fingers, to establish a rhythm, ask the group to repeat the chant after you. It goes:

I wish	I wish
I wish	I wish
I wish I may	I wish I may
I wish I might	I wish I might
Have the wish	Have the wish
I wish tonight	I wish tonight
<i>(Getting softer)</i>	
I wish	I wish
I wish	I wish
I wish	I wish
I wish	I wish

### 3. GATHERING OF EXPERTS: Partners telling stories

Congratulate the group on their growing up to become very famous at being exactly what they have wanted to become. Let them know that they have all been chosen by their communities as the best people to participate in a special project of the Mayor – called “Helping Our Children Achieve their Dreams”. Ask if they will lean over and tell a neighbor just what they have become that makes everyone respect them so much. Ask each person to introduce their partner and their achievements.



#### **4. REMEMBERING CHILDHOOD:** Half group forum – one doing, one observing

Now ask if the group will remember back to when they were young. Of course, they didn't always know what they wanted to be, they tried out many things. Divide the group in half, asking the other half to observe. Ask each person to find a place to stand alone in the room; then ask if they will demonstrate one thing they tried to be (in slow motion). Ask the observers to call out what they see people trying out as you indicate parts of the room. Then reverse the process, switching the groups who demonstrate, the ones who observe.

#### **5. PEOPLE WHO SAY “YOU CAN’T”:** Small groups of four – spoken lines

Ask if the experts can remember the people who said things to discourage trying things out. Who were they? Ask for some ideas. Then ask students to gather into groups of four. Let them select, among themselves, the best person to be trying something out. Then ask the other three to walk around that person, calling out messages that might stop them. (Example: someone tries to “hit a homer,” three people circle around him calling out – “you’re no good,” “you’re too skinny,” etc. Share demonstrations from each of the groups. Then ask just those that were the demonstrators “how did it feel, to hear those remarks?” Ask the whole group – what qualities do you need, in this situation, if you don’t want to give up?

#### **6. PEOPLE WHO SAY “YOU CAN”:** Groups of three or four – brief scenes

Ask students to find another group of three to four to work with. Together, they should think of ways that “you-can-do-it” people show their support. Ask if they can create a short scene that shows this, with each person having one line. Share the scenes and review the ideas – asking for any others that might have been left out.

#### **7. TRYING OUT** – Small groups (4-5), frozen pictures

Ask students, again, to find a new group – gathering with 4 to 5 others. We know that, in order to succeed, Grace had to try out – and trying out for something can be very hard. Let each group discuss for a bit, and choose (without telling) some “tryout” activity to work with. Then ask them if they can create a frozen picture that demonstrates one thing that makes trying out very difficult. Let each group work for a few minutes (check often and report how many groups are done). Then view the frozen pictures with the whole group, giving each picture a title.

## **8. SELF TALK – Group writing**

Remind the group that, even though they have been looking at the many obstacles to achieving a dream, they must have done well – since they have been chosen for this Mayor’s committee. They are the best people to write special “self talk” messages to the children.

Ask each participant to write on a piece of paper one thing that a child can say to themselves that will get them through the hard parts, when they are trying something new. When they have finished writing, they should place the paper in the center of the room. Then ask students to pick a piece of paper, not their own. Go around the room in a circle, each reading the phrase on their piece of paper.

## **9. REFLECTION - Whole group**

Ask the group: Were there new aspects to the story we created, using *Amazing Grace* as a base? What was the most important part of our story; can you sum up the message?

Then ask if they would like to write their own version of *Amazing Grace*, telling about their dreams, people in their life who say “you can’t” and “you can,” what’s hard for them about trying out, and what they say to themselves so they can keep on trying.

# STORYBUILDING FROM ANOTHER PLANET

## Dramatic Encounters with Aliens (free form)

**This is an example of theme-based storybuilding, without using a story book as a base.**

The activities are adapted from *Dramathemes*, by Larry Swartz<sup>1</sup>, an excellent resource for dramatic activity ideas, grades K – 5. They use drama strategies to explore a theme for about an hour, leading students to create original work. Groups of ten or larger work best, so think about combining small groups and co-facilitating this unit with other leaders. After each activity title below, the dominant multiple intelligences are indicated in parentheses.

### 1. SHARING STORIES (Interpersonal/verbal)

In a group discussion, ask students to share stories they know, or have seen, about life on another planet. Then ask if they would be willing to create their own story about an alien visiting earth.

### 2. INTRODUCING THE THEME (Rhythmic/musical)

Ask students to repeat these lines, getting louder and louder (clapping along to establish the rhythm):

*An alien creature is coming this way'*

*Getting closer and closer every day (chorus)*

Then ask students to work in pairs to make up two lines to describe the alien (an example follows):

*It has five flabby noses*

*It eats garden hoses (verse)*

When student complete their lines, print them out on a blackboard so the whole group can chant the verses, each followed by the chorus. Finally, add movement to the chanting, asking for suggestions of one motion to go with each line.

### 3. HEARING REPORTS (Verbal/interpersonal)

Begin the story building by telling the beginning. "In a town where nothing unusual ever happens, something very strange and unique occurs. In the middle of the night, after many flashes of light and strange noises, an unusual egg-like object appears in the town square. The following day, many townspeople gather together to share stories about what they saw and heard." Ask the group if they will be the townspeople, walking about town and sharing gossip about this strange event. Did they awaken? What did they see or hear in the night?

Allow a few minutest for these exchanges; then take on the role of a newspaper reporter, and ask the townspeople to tell you their stories, so you can write them up. Take notes and summarize the main points you will make in your story, asking for corrections and their headline ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Swartz, L. (1995). *Dramathemes*. Portsmouth: NH: Heinemann.

#### **4. THE ALIEN HATCHES** (Kinesthetic/spatial/musical)

Make a small circle of chairs to represent the alien egg. Tell students that, after a few days, small throbings and sounds are detected; it appears that the egg might hatch. Divide your group into two parts. Ask one half to go inside the chair circle and become parts of the alien, breaking free. Ask the other half to watch carefully and create the sound effects of this hatching. Allow the two groups to switch roles, so students get to try both activities.

#### **5. STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN** (Kinesthetic/spatial)

Divide your group into pairs or groups of three. Tell students that, after the alien hatches, strange things occur in the town. Pictures of these events appear in the newspaper, but the alien creature never shows up in the picture. Ask the groups to create these pictures, constructing a “freeze frame” in which every member plays a role. As students share their work, the observing students interpret what they see and provide a caption for each picture.

#### **6. A TOWN MEETING** (Logical/verbal)

Tell your group that, after all these stories appear, the Mayor decides some action must be taken, and invites the wisest citizens to a special meeting. Taking the role of secretary to the Mayor, explain to the experts that they are needed to propose actions to protect the community. Review the list of captions from the previous activity (strange things happening), and list the experts’ recommendations.

#### **7. HIDING PLACES** (Kinesthetic/spatial/verbal)

Explain that the alien, feeling uncertain about the earth’s surroundings, becomes very good at hiding and observing in order to figure things out. Ask groups of three to create a brief scene (each member has one line to say) of something the alien needs to watch. Before beginning work, speculate about activities an alien would need to understand. Share the scenes and discuss their themes, giving each a title.

#### **8. ALIEN INTERVIEWS** (Verbal/interpersonal)

Four weeks pass, during which the alien learns to interpret and produce language; it makes contact with one child who is open and unafraid. Separate the group into pairs, and ask them to create an early conversation between the alien and its earthling friend. Before this work begins, rehearse some of the questions which might be asked. After a few minutes of work, gather the earthlings into the center of the room. Tell them that the Mayor is aware of their special alien knowledge and that they must report what they know.

*(At this point the story might be heading in many directions. The students may be reluctant to report, or they may feel compelled. Some may have stories that present great dangers to the community, others may have interviewed a harmless alien and want to protect it. The facilitator must help the group sort out and resolve the story. Remember that the mayor's "experts" can help to figure out a resolution.)*

#### **9. JOINING THE COMMUNITY** (Logical/verbal/musical/kinesthetic)

Suggest that the City Council and the Mayor's experts figure out a new approach to the alien invasion, asking the "experts" how they revise their recommendations. Then ask if the alien and the community ever get together in the same room. What would happen at this event? Work to dramatize their ideas. This ending can take many forms, depending on the group's inclination – a song, a dance, a final "frozen picture," etc.

After such activities, children's imaginations and experience have been thoroughly fed, both by their own participation and by observing the creations of classmates. This is an ideal time to ask children to write a reflective journal (*My Encounter with the Alien*), make a book (together or individually), or read great stories about strange creatures or aliens (such as *Where the Wild Things Are*).